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Schwarzenegger and Shatner have done it. So have P. Diddy and Paris Hilton. And you too can be roller-coaster royalty. This theme-park season, don't get stuck with the herd -- do it VIP-style with front-of-the-line ride access, prime seats for parades, and the inside scoop on park highlights. KIRA VERMOND, three-year-old in tow, ventures beyond the velvet rope at Disney World

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KIRA VERMOND

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'kay, you might want to distract Nathan now," whispers Sarah Smith, the Walt Disney World guide assigned to my family for the day.

Then I see what she's pointing to. It's Chip and Dale sauntering across the parking lot, heading over to a set of picnic tables scattered near a squat, industrial-looking building. Smith is shuttling us from Disney's Animal Kingdom Theme Park to Disney-MGM Studios via back roads connecting the parks as part of a six-hour, whirlwind VIP tour.

Apparently, we've stumbled upon a ticking time bomb. "You never know what they're going to do when they're not in character," Smith explains gravely.

I imagine Dale suddenly flipping his buddy the bird in the middle of an animated conversation, or Chip yanking off his head to get a little air in this 35-degree heat. I quickly swing my son's stroller around.

"Hey, sweetie," I say a little frantically. "You want to see Beauty and the Beast now? How about some water? Are you thirsty? Want mommy to get you some water?"

And that's as stressful as our second day at Disney World gets.

Night and day. That's the only way to describe the difference between our first attempt at braving the Magic Kingdom on our own -- which included bouts of crying, frenzied searches for the washroom, waiting in queues and a general feeling of "Where the hell are we?" -- and our VIP tour on Day 2.

While Disney has been running these excursions for its executives' families and celebrities for decades, it was only in the early 1990s that the

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company began offering similar tours to the rest of us. Today, during the busiest times of the year, Walt Disney World operates up to 45 tours each day, despite little advertising and marketing. It's about \$145 an hour, with a five-hour minimum, for up to 10 people. Guests who stay at one of the official Disney resorts pay \$110 an hour. An extra \$140 a day gets you private transportation.

The popularity of VIP tours like Disney's is part of a growing trend among theme parks aiming to offer guests more bang for more bucks. Universal Studios, Sea World, Busch Gardens and Cedar Point all give guests an opportunity to buy holiday happiness south of the border.

The trend has also moved north, with Montreal's La Ronde offering its own version of a VIP service on Saturdays and Wednesdays (the most popular days during the summer, owing to fireworks displays). **Paramount Canada's Wonderland near Toronto, however, hasn't rolled out VIP tours and has no plans to do so.**

Special events manager Kris Williams says this is because most of Wonderland's visitors are local, rather than vacationers seeking a no-holds-barred getaway.

Because of the tours' relatively small, mostly affluent clientele -- and perhaps owing to their elitist bent -- you won't find many big glossy ads touting these VIP services. But visitors are finding out about them anyway, says Chris Wojcik, who runs Disney's VIP Tour Services, mainly by word of mouth.

The parks have their own takes on the service. Universal Orlando, for example, touts a variety of VIP tours. For \$120 a day (plus tax and admission), people can take a non-private, five-hour tour with up to 11 other people. For an \$1,800 flat rate, up to 12 people can take a private guided tour for up to eight hours. It includes front-of-the-line ride access and reserved seating for shows.

But do Universal VIPs get the hairy eyeball from the poor chumps who have to wait in line? Rhonda Murphy, spokeswoman for Universal Orlando, sidesteps the question with, "Any of our guests are welcome to be part of the VIP tours."

Robert Bartholome, tours supervisor at Busch Gardens in Tampa Bay, Fla., is more forthcoming about tour guides running interference. "Occasionally that happens. It depends on how busy it is that day," he says.

Busch Gardens offers an eight-hour private tour for \$295 a person that includes front-of-the-line access for rides and shows, lunch at a swishy restaurant, and a two-hour behind-the-scenes Animal Adventure Tour where guests can get up close and personal with hippos, black rhinos and giraffes. But leave the tiny tots at home. You've got to be at least 13 years old.

While not technically a tour, La Ronde's \$2,350 VIP service gives up to 10 people unlimited access to rides during the day, as well as a welcome cocktail party, a four-course meal with wine, a private box to watch the fireworks and post-pyrotechnics wine and cheese. Ah, such joie de vivre.

The newest entry into VIP tours is Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio, home of some of the world's biggest, baddest roller coasters. Spokesman Robin Innes, who books the tours, says the park introduced its VIP program for the 2005 season. "Over the last couple of years, we had a lot of inquiries about it. People were interested," he says.

Cedar Point's VIP tour may be the most comprehensive. For \$1,650, up to six people get special parking privileges, a private tour guide, no waiting in

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lines for rides, VIP seating for shows, call-ahead reservations for any restaurant and even complimentary photos of those wide-mouth moments on a coaster. The tour lasts as long as the park's operating hours. Ride junkies are the frequent fliers for this program, Innes says.

At Disney, however, line-butting privileges aren't part of the experience. "Our service does not bypass the lines with our guests, but what they get is the expertise of the tour guides who know the traffic flow of the park," VIP tour manager Wojcik says.

The tour guide does the grunt work when collecting Fastpass time tickets, which allow riders to bypass the "regular" line and use a faster express line instead. But it does take some planning. While VIP guests ride Space Mountain, for example, the guide hightails his or her way over to the next ride and slips their park tickets into the Fastpass machine to receive a "return-time" ticket. Guests then use the express line to get on the next ride at the time indicated on the ticket, say, from 11 a.m. until 11:45 a.m. Anyone can use the Fastpass system, but few people have a gofer.

Smith says families who book VIP tours are usually affluent -- and busy, as evidenced by all the dads hunched over BlackBerry handhelds as the Magic Kingdom parade passes our roped-off seating area.

But there are ways to make a VIP tour more affordable. Because she can take up to 10 people, Smith says two families of five can travel together and split the cost.

There's one more VIP option available: Go with an independent tour guide. Michael Hewell, president of Michael's VIPS of Orlando, has been guiding vacationers around Florida for the past six years. His staff cost \$120 an hour, plus a 20-per-cent tip.

Before branching out on his own, Hewell had Smith's job as a Disney VIP guide. "I wanted to say 'yes' to everything my guests asked to do, instead of 'no.' As a theme park guide, there are so many 'no's,' " he says, explaining that anything beyond Disney's boundaries -- shopping malls, Sea World, Universal and other Florida attractions -- is off limits for Disney guides.

But my Disney VIP tour provides all the amusement I could want. Smith meets us at our resort precisely at 10 a.m. and eases us into a company Cadillac (only celebrities and media guests are "back-doored" like this). She's grace incarnate, folding up strollers, calling ahead to reserve show seats, securing a bench in a roped-off VIP area to watch the coveted afternoon parade, locating a kid-friendly place to eat, and deftly finding ways to avoid preschool meltdowns. My son keeps shooting her lovey-dovey eyes. And by the end of the day, so am I.

Book your tour

VIP EXCURSIONS

Walt Disney World: Orlando, Fla.; 407-560-4033; disneyworld.com.

Cedar Point: Sandusky, Ohio; 419-627-2226;
<http://www.cedarpoint.com>.

Universal Orlando: 407-363-8295; <http://www.usf.com>.

Busch Gardens: Tampa Bay, Fla.; 813-984-4043;
bgt.viptours@buschgardens.com; <http://www.buschgardens.com>.

La Ronde: 22 chemin Macdonald, Île Sainte-Hélène, Montreal; 514-397-

2000; <http://www.laronde.com/en>.

Sea World San Diego: 1-800-237-4268; <http://www.seaworld.com>.

Offers everything from 90-minute to two-hour specialized tours for up to 10 people, where they can interact with all things aquatic. Prices range from \$295 to \$590. Rides and shows are also included.

Alton Towers: Alton, Staffordshire, England; 44 (8705) 204 060;

<http://www.alton-towers.co.uk>. For about \$75, this British theme park's "celebrators party package" offers VIP seating at shows, priority passes for some of the most popular rides and even a pre-arrival pack that comes with streamers, balloons and a party-mix CD. There's no tour guide, though.

Michael's VIPS: <http://www.michaelsvips.com> or

<http://www.tourguidemike.com>.

How to be a theme park VIP -- on the cheap

Universal Studios Theme Park: Visitors staying at one of Universal's three on-site hotels automatically get to use the separate express line for rides and attractions. They just have to show their room key. People staying off-site can buy an Express Plus Pass for around \$20 to reap the same rewards. According to Universal, the average wait time for rides is less than 15 minutes. For more information, call 407-363-8000 or visit <http://www.universalstudios.com>.

Walt Disney World: Sometimes called a "reservation system" for its most popular attractions, Disney's FastPass is a boon for people who hate to wait. Just stick your park ticket into the FastPass machine beside the ride you want, and it will spit out a slip that tells you when to come back and use the express line. The best news? It's free. For more information, call 407-934-7639 or visit disney.ca.

Busch Gardens: While it doesn't have an express system, Busch Gardens does offer less expensive tours for people who don't mind being lead around with a small number of strangers. The Adventure Thrill front-line access tour costs \$90 a person on top of park admission, and lasts five hours. Lunch is included. For more information, call 1-888-800-5447 or visit <http://www.buschgardens.com>.

Michael's VIPS: Can't drop \$120 an hour on his personal tour guides? For \$26, Michael Hewell offers an on-line Florida vacation planning guide at <http://www.tourguidemike.com> covering everything from tricks to land the best attraction seats to what rides might scare a toddler. Plug in your vacation preferences and the site also recommends attractions and shows. Kind of like stowing Hewell in your pocket.

Paramount Canada's Wonderland: Looking for another way to bypass lines? Visit on unpopular days. Canada's Wonderland recommends visiting the park weekdays during the summer, any day during June and fall weekends. Overcast days are a good bet too. For more information, visit <http://www.canadas-wonderland.com> or call 905-832-8131.

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